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SUBJECT: BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION: BELGIAN MUSLIMS FACE MULTIPLE CHALLENGES

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¶1. (U) SUMMARY: More than half of Belgium's immigrants from Morocco and Turkey (nearly all of whom are Muslim) live below the Belgian poverty line, defined as 777 euros (approximately \$1,000) or less, per household, per month. This finding is from "Poverty in the Migrant Population," the first part of an academic research project released in October 2006. The final project, with joint research by two leading Belgian universities, is scheduled for publication in October 2007. The following is based on discussions with study authors, plus a variety of other sources. END SUMMARY

REPORT FOCUSES ON LEGAL IMMIGRANTS, OVER GENERATIONS

¶2. (U) "Poverty in the Migrant Population" compares the economic conditions of native-born Belgians with those of different immigrant groups living in Belgium. The aim of the academic study, a first of its kind in Belgium, is to examine the links between immigration and poverty. The project is financed by the King Baudouin Foundation, an independent organization funded with proceeds from the Belgian National Lottery and other sources. Jointly researched by two leading Belgian universities, the Dutch-speaking University of Antwerp and the French-speaking University of Liege, the project examines various indicators of social well-being, including employment, education, housing, and health. The study focused on Moroccans and Turks because these groups are the largest Muslim groups in Belgium and have been in Belgium for three or four generations. Clandestine and illegal immigrants are excluded from the analysis. The first part of the report, released in October 2006, provides figures about the economic conditions of immigrant communities in Belgium; complete results will be released in October 2007.

WHO IS A BELGIAN?

¶3. (U) For purposes of this report, a "Belgian" is defined as a Belgian citizen born of Belgian parents. A "naturalized Belgian" refers to someone who acquired Belgian citizenship after birth, often through marriage or legal immigration. People belonging to this latter group may refer to themselves as "Belgian of (country of birth)-origin." First-generation immigrants were born outside of Belgium. Second-generation immigrants are the offspring born in Belgium of first-generation immigrants. Dual nationality complicates the statistics.

BRIEF HISTORY: MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS INVITED AS GUEST WORKERS

¶4. (U) Following World War II, the government of Belgium (GOB) invited foreign laborers on a temporary basis through a series of bilateral agreements, first with neighboring

European countries, and then with more distant countries. The first accord was with Italy in 1946. The initial wave of immigrants came to work primarily in the mining sector in the French-speaking region of Wallonia in southern Belgium. Agreements with Spain (1956) and Greece (1957) followed. In 1964, Belgium signed bilateral accords with Morocco and Turkey, opening the way for an expanding immigrant influx for the next indtemporary workers had decided to stay in Belgium permanently and sought o have thacted legislation i 1974 to facilitate immigration linked to "fa-ily reunification." Today this program constitutes the main source of legal immigration to Blgium. y easier. A 1984 law granted full Belgian citizenship to children as long as at least one parent was Belgian. A 1991 law granted Belgian citizenship to children in the third generation of immigrants. In 2000 Belgium implemented new legislation that streamlined and eased acquisition of Belgian citizenship. All those born in

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17. (U) As of January 1, 2005, native-born and naturalized Belgians numbered 9,574,990 -- or 91 percent of the Belgian population. The total number of foreigners legally residing in Belgium numbered 870,862. Of the foreigners, 591,404 come from within the EU and 279,458 from non-EU countries. Italy, with 179,015, is the largest source-country overall for immigrants. Of those from non-EU countries, 81,279 are Moroccan and 39,885 are Turkish, the two largest groups. (NOTE: Estimates of persons of Moroccan descent range from 300,000 up to 700,000 when legal and illegal immigrants, naturalized Belgians, and third generation immigrants are included. In addition, the number of refugees from Muslim countries resident in Belgium was estimated at 7,000 in 2004. END NOTE.)

18. (SBU) Belgium's Muslim population is diverse, comprising Northern and sub-Saharan Africans, Middle Easterners, European converts, and others. While it is illegal to collect official data on race and religion in Belgium, informed estimates do exist, including some from officials in the Belgian Muslim community. The most reliable figures put the Muslim population at about half a million, or nearly five percent of Belgium's total of 10.6 million people. The greatest concentration of Muslims is in Belgium's capital, Brussels, with significant numbers also living in the industrial areas of Wallonia. Nearly one in five residents of Brussels is of Muslim origin. Brussels is home to nearly 40 percent of Belgium's Muslims, concentrated primarily in the neighborhoods (communes) of Schaerbeek, Molenbeek, and Brussels-City. Thirty-five percent of Moroccans and Turks in Brussels are under 18, and 25 percent of Brussels' total under-20 population is of Moroccan descent. Higher birth rates, continuing immigration, and religious conversion ensure that Belgium's Muslim population will continue to grow during the coming decades. Half of Belgium's Moroccan community lives in Brussels, with other communities in Antwerp, Liege, and the former coal-mining areas of Hainaut, Charleroi, and Limburg. Half of the Turkish community lives in Flanders, with the largest concentration in Ghent.

ISLAM IN BELGIUM, AND THE MUSLIM EXECUTIVE

19. (U) There are an estimated 380 mosques in Belgium. After Catholicism, Islam is the second-most practiced religion in Belgium, and the fastest growing. The GOB officially recognizes six religions, including, since 1974, Islam. Official recognition has numerous advantages including the payment of religious leaders' salaries and construction and maintenance of religious buildings. 850 primary and secondary schools have Islamic religious education courses, which reach about 30,000 students, funded by the Belgian state.

110. (SBU) While not overtly fractious, the Muslim community in Belgium remains diverse enough to defy simplistic characterization. Because of a perceived lack of organization and focus within the community, the Belgian

government created the Muslim Executive Council (MEC) in 1998 with which to establish an official liaison relationship such as it had with other religious groups.

¶11. (SBU) In theory, the MEC represents the entire Muslim community of Belgium and serves as an official mediator between the GOB and Belgian Muslims. Coskun Beyazgul, Belgian-born of Turkish immigrants, was elected in October 2005 as the President of the 68-member assembly, governed by a 17-member executive. Like assembly members, his term is for five years. The 17 members of the current executive include eight Turks, six Moroccans, two Pakistanis, and one Albanian. The MEC decided that the composition of the executive should include approximately equal numbers from both French and Flemish language communities.

¶12. (SBU) Not all Muslims agree on the organization's role as the official representative of the Belgian Muslim community with the Belgian government. Some Moroccan leaders boycotted the organization's October 2005 elections in protest over equitable representation and concerns about the suitability of some of the elected leaders. Further, the GOB

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"screened out" a handful of potential candidates for the 2005 MEC elections for security reasons, and various officials have been investigated over the years. Finally, some mosques prefer a more independent status, distancing themselves from the benefits and scrutiny that accompany official GOB recognition.

HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT, COMPOUNDED BY DISCRIMINATION

¶13. (U) Labor participation (or employment) rates of the population aged 15-64 years old in Belgium demonstrate striking differences. The study examined employment rates for men and women in five categories:

--Belgians

Men: 69 percent
Women: 54 percent
Total: 61 percent

--Naturalized Belgians

Men: 61 percent
Women: 42 percent
Total: 51 percent

--EU-15

Men: 67 percent
Women: 45 percent
Total: 56 percent

--EU beyond the EU-15 core members

Men: 50 percent
Women: 28 percent
Total: 38 percent

--Moroccans/Turks

Men: 41 percent
Women: 11 percent
Total: 26 percent

¶14. (SBU) With just one in four Moroccans and Turks of working age employed in Belgium, this group has a disproportionately higher rate of unemployment than any other category. The study opines that the very low employment among women may be explained by family structure, limited education levels, and a lack of fluency in French or Dutch, the two primary languages spoken in Belgium.

¶15. (SBU) In addition to low skill levels and insufficient mastery of host-country languages, non-Belgians (especially Muslims) often encounter discrimination in the job market. In May 2005, a French-language Belgian economic weekly,

Trends Tendances, surveyed more than 500 administrators and human resources directors from a range of Belgian companies. Some of the key findings include:

--Nearly 80 percent agreed that immigrants experience Discrimination in the workplace.

--58 percent favored banning the wearing of a veil in the workplace.

--Although 70 percent of the surveyed businesses said they employ immigrants, foreign laborers tend to be hired for basic menial tasks.

--All other factors being equal, nearly half of employers said they prefer to hire a person of European origin.

--Companies were asked to list factors that contribute to discrimination in the work place. Nearly 50 percent of companies identified "being of Muslim origin" as the number one reason for discrimination in the hiring process. Other reasons include: foreign origin, lack of university education, age, sex, and being a union member. Although some level-the-playing-field measures have been considered (such as the "anonymous C.V."--a curriculum vitae without photo or name), discrimination in the workplace remains a problem. In an ongoing effort to address the situation, the Belgian House of Representatives discussed anti-discrimination measures in early 2007.

LOWER LEVELS OF EDUCATION AMONG IMMIGRANT POPULATION

116. (U) The survey found that the risk of poverty increases for those with lower levels of education and training. In comparison with Belgians, those of Moroccan or Turkish origin are more than twice as likely to have completed only a

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primary school education: just 30 percent of Moroccans and 63 percent of Turks have attended classes beyond age 12. Further, Moroccans and Turks are four times as likely not to have studied at the university level. Twenty-eight percent of Moroccans and Turks have not attended university, compared to six percent of Belgians who have not. A recent study in Flanders found that 71 percent of Flemish girls begin higher education after high school, compared to less than 20 percent of girls from Turkish or Moroccan backgrounds. Even fewer boys from immigrant communities undertook a university education. The survey found that poor reading levels were equally found in both first and second generation students and second generation students. Thus, immigrants whose entire academic studies have taken place in Belgium do not necessarily have higher levels of educational achievement, such as better reading levels or graduation rates.

HOUSING

117. (U) According to the study, the r Belgium is two times @nts, compars for receiving medical care or (ospitalization.

ON THE MARGINS OF SOCIETY

119. (SBU) The quantttative portion of the study concludes that alQ non-Belgians, but especially Moroccan and TQrkish immigrants, are increasingly on the margins of economic viability in Belgium. The stuy has important implications for the demographics of Belgian society and, by extension, itspolitical voice. The second part of the stuQy, set for release in October 2007, will examine how socioeconomic conditions convey down successive generations of immigrants.

POLITICALLY FOREIGNERS, INCLUDING MUSLIMS, PARTICIPATING MORE

120. (U) Perhaps to improve their circumstances, the extended Muslim community in Belgium is exhibiting better organization

and cooperation. This has empowered the community, enabling Belgian Muslims to make inroads into Belgium's political landscape. In the 1994 municipal elections in Brussels, of the 653 council members in the 19 communes that comprise the capital region, just 13 council members of non-EU origin were elected. By 2000, this number had increased to 89 council members of non-EU origin; 72 were Moroccan. Immigrants scored further gains in the October 2006 local elections. In the 19 Brussels communes, the increase was striking: 145 of 653 places went to representatives of foreign origin, including Moroccan, Turkish, and Congolese, among others. All but two of the nineteen Brussels communes now have at least one elected official of foreign origin. In the fifteen biggest Flemish cities, the number of foreign origin elected officials more than doubled from 16 to 40.

IMBRIE